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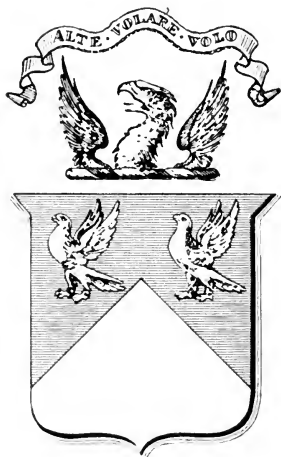


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JACK

COVENTRY DANE

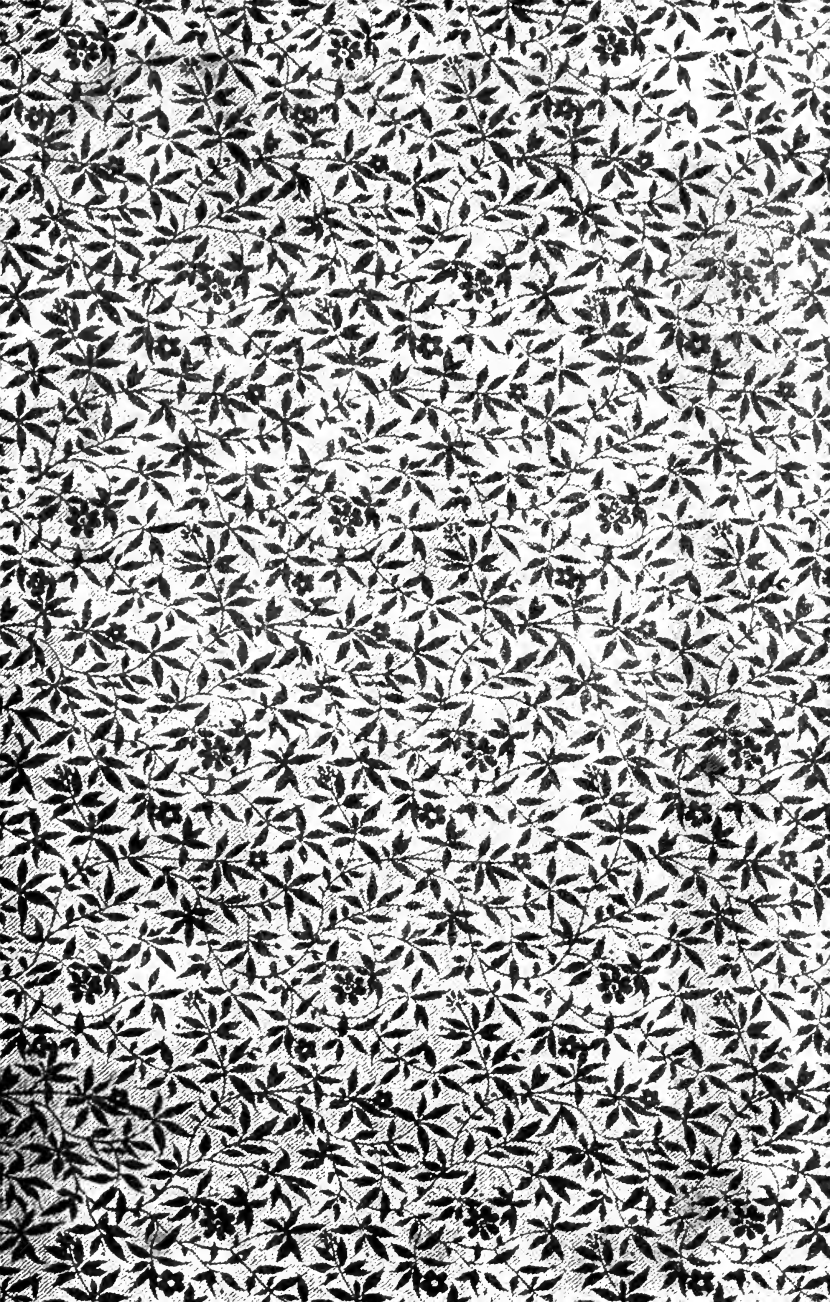
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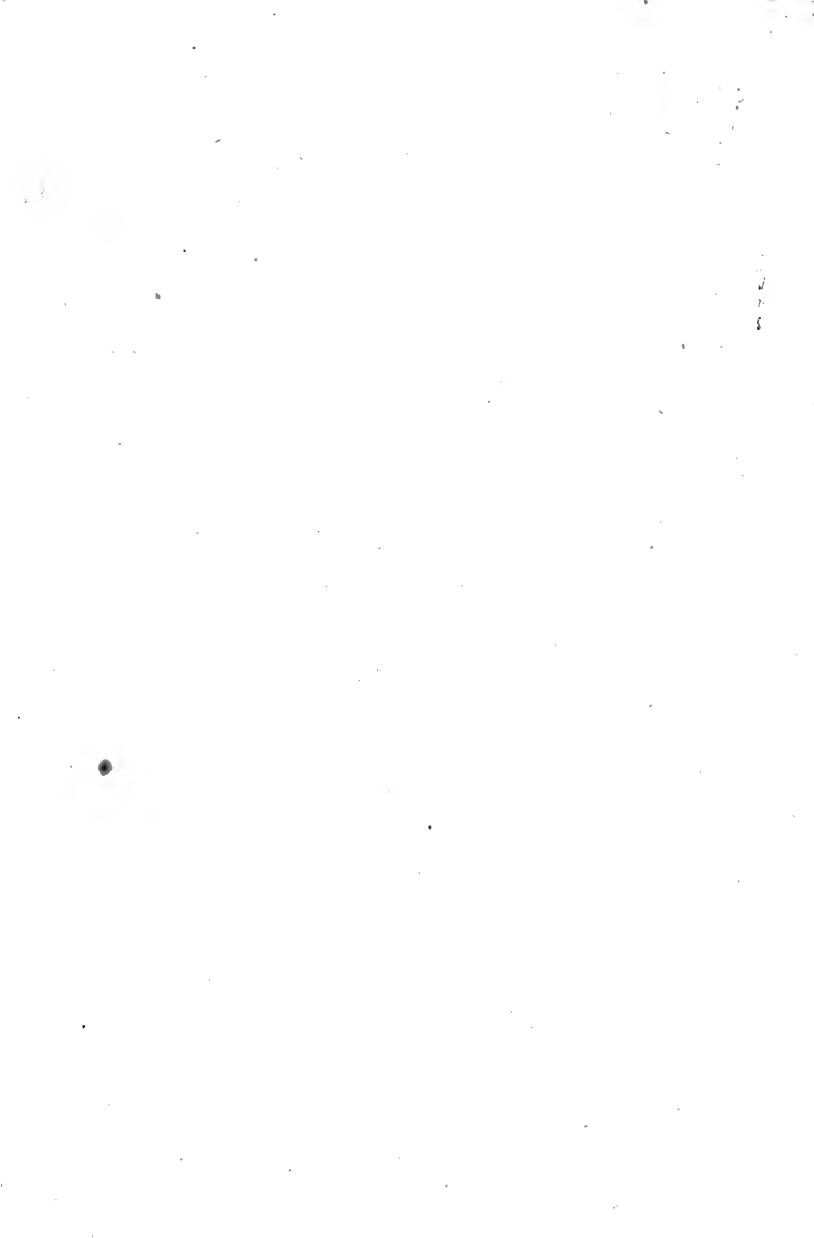


H. Morse Stephens

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J A C K.

BY

COVENTRY DANE.

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HENRY MORSE STEPHENS

Dedicated

WITH PROFOUND ESTEEM

TO

MARIE BANCROFT,

BY

COVENTRY DANE.

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JACK

CHAPTER I.

“And he set a little child in their midst.”

“ANY one in?” I cry, as I put my head within the doorway of Cousin Valentine’s studio in Chelsea. I am armed with a huge bunch of white narcissus. It is high May time, and London abounds in these sweet products of England’s old-fashioned places. Val is busy at his easel, but the moment he hears my voice he turns and comes to me, taking my hands, narcissus and all, in welcome, in his own dear, hearty way. Val and I are first cousins, indeed we neither of us possess

any living relative but the other, and we are very fast friends we two, alone in the world as we are.

“You are welcome, my cousin,” says Val, “as a varnishing ticket in April. What flowers!” he adds, burying his well-shaped nose in the midst of my bouquet.

I have just returned to town from a three months’ jaunt on the Continent, and naturally, my first visit is paid to Val; his pretty studio has always been one of my favourite haunts, and he himself my *cronie par excellence*.

“I’m glad, dear, you have not had to look in vain for your varnishing ticket this year.” There have been times, not so long ago, when my artist cousin has been unlucky in the matter of these tickets, but those evil days are past now, and I think his feet are firmly planted on fame’s

uncertain ladder at last. Val's chief weapon in his warfare with fortune is his capacity for idealizing pretty women on canvas, and his ability to meet this requirement of his day has helped to start him on the high-road to celebrity.

He is looking at me now with real pleasure in his handsome blue eyes. Val's eyes have a way of saying much more than their owner intends at times, but their meaning is genuine to-day. Val and I have seen joy and sorrow together, and the sincere love that looks out of both our faces belongs to that feeling which some say cannot exist between two people of opposite sexes. To us it is a very strong and precious thing, though it is not "the love of men and women when they love their best," and it has grown with our growth since we were children together.

“Audrey,” he says presently, “if I thought you would not misunderstand me, I should say the *rôle* of pretty, prosperous widow suited you remarkably well. I never saw you looking more comely.”

I experience a half-guilty feeling that what he says is perfectly true. Never have I felt so light-hearted as I do to-day since Robert died. Robert was my husband. He and Val were not kindred spirits, and I know that, in his inmost heart, my cousin is at this moment rejoicing in my emancipation from the bonds of holy matrimony. Robert was many years older than I, and looked upon cousinship, especially artistic cousinship, with the eye of suspicion, as well as on all paths which pointed in the faintest degree in the direction of fair Bohemia.

Mr. Fane despised artists, gazing on them askance from a lofty standpoint of

matter-of-fact superiority. I believe, in his own private mind, he held that the winner of the champion billiard match and the P. R. A. were persons with equal claims to distinction and honour among the sons of men. Val resented these sentiments on behalf of his fraternity more than on his own account, and naturally my marriage was the signal for a break in the happy terms which had hitherto existed between my cousin and myself. Since the day, ten years ago, when he handed me over at the altar to my husband's care, Val and I had gone pretty much our own ways; he to struggle on a small income for a name on the lips of men, and I on a large one to pass the years in all the inglorious idleness of an old man's darling. We met seldom during those days, but our friendship never waned; and now that poor Robert's prejudices are

no longer here to be considered, we have lapsed once more into the old, cheery companionship of former times.

“ You always say pleasant things, and generally mean them, Val,” I reply to his little speech about my looks ; “ but any way, you and I will never grow old and ugly to each other,” and verily, as my eye dwells upon his handsome *physique*, it strikes me there is something terribly incongruous in the thought of Val and old age. Old age, on which many are given to descant poetically, pointing out the sweetness and beauty of the decline of life in language of much pathos and tenderness, but it always seems to me to be a poetry suggestive of nothing else so much as gout and hot flannels, toothlessness and ear-trumpets.

When I have taken stock of my companion, I turn to look at the subject of

his work. Val's *specialité* is female loveliness, but no dream of fair women gazes at me from his canvas to-day, only the roughly-sketched-in form of a young child, with some lines behind him, intended by-and-by to develop into another figure, but as yet it is impossible to tell of what character.

“There is my model,” says Val, pointing over his shoulder; and turning, I see a child lying among the cushions of a couch in a distant corner of the room. The little fellow has thick, gold hair, which stands out around his lovely face in picturesque profusion. Big, heavily-lashed, grey eyes look up at me from under his curls, and as I watch him, the vague memory of some other face I have seen somewhere darts through my mind, but escapes again before I can catch whose face it is the baby recalls. He is

amusing himself with some toys and books, and I notice that his little white frock is tied round with a broad black sash, while the sleeves are similarly trimmed.

“What a beauty, Val,” I cry as the child looks up at me with a smile breaking over his sweet face. “Who is he.” We are close to him now, and I hold out my arms to take him up.

“He is Jack.” says Val, “arn’t you, my boy; I’m going to paint his portrait.”

“But whose is he?” once more I ask, unable to move my eyes from the boy’s exquisite face. I have no children of my own, and comprehend not their powers of supplying happiness, but this little fellow, with his bright smile, wins me strangely, and I feel that then and there he finds his way into my heart, hitherto so empty of all

child-love, and with no corner in it where any little one has ever held empire.

“His mother is dead, Audrey,” Val presently says, disregarding my repeated question as to the proprietorship of the baby. His voice is compassionate, and he looks very tenderly on the child. Children and women are marks of especial tenderness to Valentine Murray, though ere now he has had cause to repent the carrying his views on the subject into practice. Once, years ago, his sunny heart was bowed down in the dust of bitter trial by reason of the perfidy of one weak member of that uncertain sex, which even still Val continues to champion. As I look at him now, I recall that woeful time, with its useless tears and utter waste of strong love and faith. It is over now, and he has come out of it all, outwardly the same merry-hearted soul he always was, but

away down in the depth of his heart he carries the mark of his branding, and will so carry it always, I know, as I remember the fair face of his Delilah, and curse her inwardly.

“His mother is dead,” Val says, “and he was her only child.”

Poor mite! By this time I have gathered him into my arms, and he has come to me so freely and naturally that I am touched, and for the first time in my life made glad by the clasp of baby fingers round my neck. Why was it, Jack, dear little Jack, with your sweet smile, that reminded me of some other which I could not remember then, that, from the first moment I saw you, the longing to win you to myself rose up in my soul, and the fountain of mother love, which is part of every woman's nature, overflowed my heart at sight of your flower-like face?

CHAPTER II.

“Whose infant may that be?”

Jean Ingelow.

PRESENTLY we gather up the toys, and begin a game together, and I find myself getting quite excited amidst the delights of Noah's ark and wooden soldiers, whose manœuvres take place upon an expanding drill-ground. Jack is too young to talk to me, having only found command of about half a dozen words of his mother-tongue, but that does not prevent our becoming very confidential and indulging in important conversations, where signs and curious sounds make up for all deficiencies of the Queen's English.

Val is painting, and taking occasional looks at us by turns. By-and-by, when I turn my head for a moment in his direction, I surprise a look in his eyes which says very plainly that my present occupation finds great favour therein.

“I wish he were your own, Audrey,” he says, but I see from his face he regrets his speech the next moment.

“Don’t make me discontented with things as they are,” I reply, feeling what a misfortune my childlessness was in my cousin’s opinion; “besides, you know Robert hated children.”

Whereupon Val grumbles something under his breath, which I pretend not to hear, but which suggested that in the entertainment of his own peculiar feelings Robert enjoyed the unusual benefits of reciprocity.

Just then my cousin is called away, and

he leaves us, begging me to remain with little Jack till he returns.

We play together some time longer, but by-and-by the child's eyes grow heavy, and I take him up into my lap, where, with his soft little arms clasped round my neck, he falls fast asleep.

We are very still now, and as we rest thus the warm spring breezes come in through the open window, wafting across our faces the breath of sweet flowers, and gently stirring the gay Eastern curtains and great plumes of wavy grasses which are littered about this studio of Val's with tasteful profusion.

The hum of the distant town, and the wash of the river among its piers and bridges, so near to where I am sitting, steal softly in upon the air, the peace and serenity of the place fills my soul with repose, and I dream in company with the

baby in my arms, though my own eyes are wide open.

Naturally I fall to speculating about little Jack; who was he, and how came Val to be entertaining him? And the poor little mother who was dead? Surely the memory of Jack's sweet face must be with her where she is gone, even in the very presence of the angels of God. Death is never so cruel as when he steps in between the love of mother and child. Who can say if heaven is quite heaven without the baby smile and the soft clinging touch of the little one left behind, or if a woman may be happy and *remember*!

Val has been working very hard since I last saw the inside of his studio. Everywhere is the evidence of a life of occupation. There are canvases of many designs and sizes, and all degrees of progress, dotted about the place, chiefly women's pretty faces. Val's enemies say

that he owes his success in life chiefly to the vanity of the beauties and would-be beauties of his day, and that his pictures are more celebrated for a certain artistic fashion with which he manages to invest them than for any real merit. Be that as it may, they command a very decent price in the market nowadays. Royalty itself has spoken of them in terms of high flattery, and gone so far even as to pay for some of them, which surely may be taken as a proof of sincerity.

Just then I hear a man's footsteps ascending the stairs, while a voice, which does not seem quite unfamiliar, calls out cheerily my cousin's name. Receiving no answer, the owner of the voice walks into the room to see for himself where Mr. Murray may be. Jack and I are reposing in a long lounging chair, and he is still asleep. I dare not move lest I awake him, so I hold up a warning finger, and turn to

survey the intruder, who is standing still in the middle of the room, looking at us with a quiet smile on his face, greatly mixed with amusement. I know him in an instant, and I should know him in Van Diemen's land. He is the actor, Paul Lindsay. It is unusual to forget Paul Lindsay, having ever seen him, and I have seen him once before. My thoughts fly back to a night in a bygone June, to the sweet old shades of the forest of Arden, to Rosalind and Orlando, and I recall it all as freshly as a thing of yesterday, with this man standing before me, this man, who was said to be the best Orlando of modern times, whose present success has thoroughly borne out his early promise, so that to-day London is ringing with the perfection of his acting from one end of the town to the other.

He moves across the room to where we

are sitting, still with that look of amusement in his eyes. Even a stranger, I suppose, can see at a glance that my novitiate in child tending has only just begun, and the conviction nettles me. I conclude that the state of my mind is to be gathered from my countenance, for the intruder assumes a graver look as he begs my pardon for interrupting me so noisily.

“ Luckily,” he adds, “ I have not wakened the little fellow,” while his eyes linger long and softly on Jack, still slumbering peacefully.

I feel a little propitiated, though I assure myself that no one, even this stranger, could fail to look kindly on this particular child, so fair and winsome is he, and there is the significance of the black sash as well. May be, this man guesses why it is worn. “ His mother’s dead, no worse can be,” says Jean Ingelow in her beautiful

writings, and truly a heart of cast-iron might have been touched by the sight this motherless little one in his early acquaintance with the saddest loss of a lifetime, and Paul Lindsay's face did not suggest the possession of a heart of that quality.

"May I stay here a little while," he says, "to wait for Mr. Murray? He told me to be here at four, for a sitting, you know, and it is quite that now."

He speaks softly, I notice, not to disturb Jack, and I feel more inclined than ever to absolve him for betraying his amusement at my unusual occupation.

"Stay by all means; my cousin can't be away much longer." This I say with the feeling strong upon me that I must account for my presence here in some way, and I continue, with a well-assumed air of conviction, "You need

not be afraid of Jack crying directly he awakes."

"Let us hope your faith may be justified by events. To me it suggests innocence of the ways of extreme youth."

So I was right, he had taken in the situation at a glance, and pronounced me an impostor on the spot.

"But look at him," I begin warmly, "does he *seem* like a child who *could* be objectionable in any way?"

"Not in any way," replies my companion, who has seated himself within easy distance of us, in order to carry on this whispered argument with greater convenience to all concerned. "Yet appearances are deceptive. May I ask how long you have been acquainted with the subject of our discussion?"

Though this question only adds to my gathering indignation, I begin with shame to confess the truth. Naught is to be

gained by delay, and prevarication is utterly useless. Moreover, honest confession is good for the soul, though it may be lacking in attractiveness for the body.

“Only since,—let me see?—oh! since rather more than half-past two,” is my answer, given in low tones, but with rapidly reddening cheeks.

“Then I must conclude that you are apt to fall an easy victim to things as they appear,” with a quiet little smile in no way calculated to allay the irritation produced by his words.

“And who,” I retort, with more heat than wisdom, “wouldn’t fall a victim to things that appeared like this?” and clasping the boy a little closer to my heart. “He is perfection; I wish he were mine own.” Then growing grave, I add, “And besides, he has lost his mother, I suppose when he was born?”

Instantly my companion's face becomes stern and solemn as he replies,—

“Well—no, not quite so soon; she died when he was six months' old.”

“You know him then?” I cry astonished. This had never occurred to me.

“Yes,” returns Mr. Lindsay, “I know him,” and there is pain in his eyes as well as great softness as they rest on Jack. “He is my little child.”

I am quite still a moment after this; then, coming to myself, I cry sharply, “Then you might have said so at once.” Then, recalling that I have just spoken of his wife, the little dead mother, I say with contrition and real pain in my voice, “Oh, why didn't you tell me before? I am so sorry—I mean, I never would have mentioned—”

“My wife,” he says very gently. “I understand,” he adds in pity for the

remorse he can see in my face, "I know you would not, but—" and here his face hardens, and the corners of his mouth grow severe—"you have done no harm."

What did he mean? Has he ceased to grieve for her?—forgotten her already? Jack's poor little mother, who went away so soon! Can it be that this man, whose pathos can draw tears from the hardest heart of any audience, has no heart of his own, no feeling whatever? But, as I recall the love which fills his eyes for little Jack, I know this at least is not the reason why he can so easily bear to hear his dead wife's name on the lips of a stranger.

It is not to be supposed that a conversation carried on, however quietly, over a sleeping baby's head, can go on for ever without producing some effect upon the slumberer; and so at last Jack opens his eyes, and as I unclasp the little arms from about my neck and hand him over to

his father's keeping, I understand at last whose face it is which has been eluding my memory all the afternoon. They are all the world to each other, those two. It contains nothing else for either of them. Every trace of bitterness leaves Paul Lindsay's face as his eyes meet those of his child, his own eyes exactly; the same rich, darkly fringed, brilliant, grey eyes, with only that difference which exists between the clear, unclouded orbs of childhood and those which have looked on death and life; and the two faces, how alike they are as they rest close together, the golden curls mingling with the grey! It is a pathetic picture, this of the lonely man and his little son, who seem to compensate to each other for any other loss wherewith it hath pleased God to darken their days.

"You're a terrible weight, little son," says Jack's father, "and how you must

have victimized this lady! If you could command enough language, it would be only polite to return thanks for her goodness, and say how grateful daddie is to any one who is kind to little Jack,—seeing you are the only thing worth having he possesses in the world. Ah,” he goes on, “I see she is laughing at us, my son, she does not think you much to boast of after all.”

But as he glances at me I don't think it is mirth that he sees in my face, as I realize how this mite of eighteen months can constitute the grief or bliss of the man whose six-and-thirty years have brought him nought so sweet as the love of a little child.

Hereupon Valentine returns, and in his bright, cheery way, dispels the slight tension which has somehow crept into the atmosphere.

Greeting Mr. Lindsay, he immediately

begins talking to Jack. Everyone talks to Jack; the baby, who says so little in return, and whose only stock-in-trade in the way of conversation, consists of sweet smiles, and those soft little cooing noises which children and doves have in common.

“Thanks, Jack,” says my cousin, “for undertaking my duties during my temporary absence, and introducing daddie and Mrs. Fane to each other;” and turning to us, “It is odd to me that you two have never met here before, considering you both think it necessary to bestow upon me as much of your spare time as I can conveniently avail myself of; and if you pressed me very much, I should have to confess that you both occupy the same high level in the order of merit of my appreciation.”

Though he speaks flippantly, Val's words mean all they convey. Paul Lindsay plays

David to his Jonathan, and I suppose it is only my frequent sojourns abroad which have prevented my seeing them together ere now.

“I say the same level,” he continues, “that neither of you may have just cause for jealousy.”

“Your vanity is so overwhelming that it has caused you to overlook entirely the only subject which could arouse the jealousy of Mr. Lindsay. Nothing but an attempt to divert the affections of Jack into some other channel could do *that*,” I reply maliciously.

Am I really growing jealous? To-day, for the first time, the feeling has been borne in upon me of my own solitariness; I have no one of my very own, and am nothing of unusual importance to any one. Val’s friend I am certainly; but he has his David as well; and David again has his

baby boy ; and I—I have, at the age of eight-and-twenty, no first place in any human heart, and the fact comes home to me now with fierce and startling bitterness. To be first with some one is the natural inclination of all women, and sad is the hour when one of the sisterhood realizes that she is beyond the pale of supreme interest with the whole world !

My companions both look at me after this speech with a little astonishment in their gaze, and while one of them is probably debating in his own mind as to whether the ancient friendship (of which they are to-day the living representatives) was ever jeopardized by the intervention of the female element, the other, my cousin, with a mischievous glance in my direction, gives utterance as follows :—

“ John Maitland Lindsay. Pity ’tis that you were born a year and a half ago

and have already been christened according to the accepted rites of the Holy Catholic Church, for here, I perceive, is a lady fully prepared to enact the part of fairy godmother to you through life without any unnecessary hesitation. She appears further to regret"—and here Val favours her with a detestable grin—"that you are still provided with a paternal protector, for whom you seem to entertain a most unnatural partiality"—another vile grin—"and she feels injured at being unable to adopt you and your hereditary unattractiveness from this moment."

Mr. Lindsay says nothing, and attempts not to stem the flow of Val's eloquence, but by-and-by, when my cousin has tempted Jack from his arms by the help of strawberries and cream, he comes over to where I sit and says,—

"You felt very warmly for my little lad

just now. Be generous to me too," he adds rather anxiously, "and suspend your judgment of me until you *know* I am incapable of appreciating Val's friendship."

"Oh! Mr. Lindsay," I exclaim remorsefully—once more I find myself apologizing to my new acquaintance and feeling thoroughly ashamed before him—"do you think I doubt your worthiness? Forgive me, I don't know what called forth that unlucky speech"—here I glance up at him and read in his soft, kindly smile that I am already absolved; but, bent on making a clean breast of it, I continue steadily—"unless it is, as Val says, that I *am* growing jealous."

His face becomes serious in an instant, but a look of intelligence darts into it, as he glances quickly first at Val and then at me, and he answers rather coldly,—

"Ah, of course, I never thought of *that*,"

and once more he turns his eyes on my cousin, "how stupid of me."

"Don't think of it now," I interrupt hastily, having instantly followed the direction his thoughts have taken, and with a laugh that entirely dissipates the solemnity of the situation, "we certainly never shall. How funny of you," I break out afresh, and this time he joins in my laughter, and peace is established between us for the present. "It wasn't *that* kind of jealousy I meant, but one which includes all the world, more or less. I am all alone you see. You and Jack are luckier than I."

"But just now, Mrs. Fane, you pitied little Jack, now didn't you?" he asks quietly.

"Well, yes, in a way, for his loss," I reply gravely; "you understand me?" though I was becoming convinced that

never was a child whose similar loss was so well consoled.

“Yes,” he says, “it is often so. Women are very tender-hearted about Jack.”

“Naturally,” I answer him, and it occurs to me, with his own picturesque face before my eyes, that the tenderness of women is a thing by no means unknown to Jack’s father; “all the same, it is not much needed, this pity,” and I give him my hand in farewell.

Then I go across the room to where Val and Jack are amusing each other. The little sweet face of the child is covered with smiles at sight of me and held up for a kiss, but somehow I only lay my hand on the bushy, golden curls, and turn to leave the studio.

“*Won’t* you kiss him, Mrs. Fane,” says a quiet voice behind me, and Paul Lindsay

lifts up his child on a level with my face, and once more I am gladdened by the touch of clinging childish arms and lips. Then I give him back and go.

Val comes downstairs with me. "Good-bye, dear;" and still holding my hand in his—"don't let loneliness embitter my sweet little cousin," he says at parting, with the warm hand-clasp which always seems to hold strength and help in its grasp. How well he understands me, my dear boy, and how often has his been the word in season between me and unworthiness, God bless him.

The empty rooms of my dwelling seem very silent and cheerless when I reach home, and it seems to me that a few of Jack's toys, and the sound of his little pattering footsteps about the place, would help to improve the existing condition of things in a great measure, but I recollect

that no word has been spoken by any one with reference to our ever seeing each other again, so I do my best to prevent this pleasant fancy from taking too strong a hold on me. But my best was feeble.

CHAPTER III.

“Merely players.”

Shakespeare.

It is nearly a week later. June has come again. In the parks the rhododendrons and azaleas are at the height of their beauty, and everywhere is light, colour, and gaiety.

But I am dull. It has been a dull week, notwithstanding I have attended everything worth going to, and none of my friends have failed in their usual attentions, and I have loads of friends—rich widows under thirty usually have, and at present I represent in my person something like

five thousand a year of poor Robert's three per cents.

Certainly it has been an uninteresting week. I haven't seen Val and I haven't seen Jack or—or anybody, that is, anybody worth seeing; then, as I said before, my acquaintances have defrauded me not. One drove me to Hurlingham on the box-seat of his drag. One offered to get up a water-party down at Henley with a cheery little dinner to follow. Another suggested a box at the "Memorial" to see Paul Lindsay in a new play by a young author, founded upon Ouida's most anathematized production. Truly to him that hath it shall be given. One seldom hears of a play-box being bestowed upon any one who lacks the necessary funds wherewith to provide one for himself.

I declined all my friends' efforts to amuse me promptly, especially the theatre

tickets. Somehow I preferred going quietly to see that piece, and not accompanied by a trio of irreverent chatterers, as some of my would-be entertainers had proved themselves to be on similar previous occasions.

A spirit of discontent is creeping up within me, hence my surly refusal to gratify all these good-natured nonentities, whose only desire was to give me pleasure. The past week has opened my eyes to various and serious defects in my own character, in a startling manner. Val is right, I am getting soured. Time seems to be using with me the same process which he applies to bad claret, with the same disastrous results. One afternoon I am waiting for my carriage to be announced, when a letter is brought to me.

“DEAR AUDREY,” it ran, “it is not in the heart of man to resist you. To little

Jack Lindsay, the meeting with you has been attended by the usual result. He mourns for your presence, and refuses to be comforted, charm I never so wisely. If you have any regard for my professional reputation, come and help me to retain it by keeping him quiet, or never in this life shall I convey one of his numerous expressions to canvas and posterity."

"Yours helplessly,

"VAL."

Soon after the receipt of this epistle I hold little Jack once more in my arms, and then I know why the past week has been so bald of interest. Val has not progressed a scrap with the portrait.

"You see," he says wofully, "I can't keep him still. Lindsay can come so seldom, too, he is so busy rehearsing this new thing, and Jack is not so good either by himself."

This afternoon, however, we get on splendidly, and as I sit through the whole length of it, among artistic dust and disorganization, with a heavy gold-headed boy on my knee, watching Val's clever brush darting in telling strokes and touches which grow more and more like Jack every moment, never once do I regret Lady Mary's musical at-home down at Richmond, where I was due instead.

It becomes a settled thing after this, that I go to help Val with Jack whenever he requires my assistance. Sometimes Mr. Lindsay comes himself, but not often. When the sittings are over Jack and I disport ourselves in Val's little garden at the back of his house. It is a truly Bohemian garden this one. Here a stately lily, and next to it a sow-thistle equally imposing in height. Tools lie about, certainly, and watering-cans, but these seldom if ever

change their position, while the weeds flourish and the legitimate owners of the soil sprawl about in unrebuked confusion ; jessamine grows here in profusion and tall evening-primroses, for by this time it is July, and August is fast approaching. Now and then Jack's father finds us here, as we sit chatting according to our respective capacities in the tiny arbour at the top of the garden bank. I think he enjoys the repose of the quiet little place from whence he can see the waving greenery of many trees and only hear London's roar in the distance.

One day I am rather late at the studio, and I find Mr. Lindsay already there. He is holding Jack in the position Val has chosen for the portrait. The child is very quiet and patient, but directly he beholds me he makes a sudden move forward, and with a grab at my dress

cries out in his own pretty way, "See, mammie!"

For a moment there is a dead silence, then I seize the child and hold him up in my arms to hide the hot rush of blood which I feel is colouring my face.

"How did he learn to say that?" says Val, having recovered his astonishment, while Mr. Lindsay replies, "I have never heard him use that word before." I feel his eyes upon me, though I am not looking his way.

"Poor little mother," I murmur unthinkingly in my embarrassment. "She would be glad to have heard him," glancing as I say it at the child's father, though my face tingles still.

But he looks very grave as the bitterness I saw once before in his face overspreads it once more.

"Yes," but he speaks doubtfully and

with a sigh, "perhaps she would have been glad."

Perhaps only, I think to myself, turning away, for surely there is something in all this I do not understand. Paul Lindsay soon follows. The cloud is gone now and there is only an appealing look in the eyes, so like little Jack's, as he says,—

"You will forgive Jack, Mrs. Fane, he is too young to understand when he is taking a liberty!"

"A liberty!" I cry; "oh, I see," as his meaning flushes upon me. "Yes, thank goodness," I continue warmly, "he is too young to be trammelled with the idiotic regulations of this world, but not too young to understand when he may set them at defiance," and I give Jack a soft hug to my heart.

"I beg your pardon," his father continues; "I know how good you are to the child, and

believe me I am grateful," and indeed the poor fellow looks it. Life is not all cakes and ale for them, I daresay. How should it be so for the lonely man and his motherless baby ?

Time goes on and we come to the first week in August. Of course no one is in London now, i.e. no one who need not work for their daily bread ; for my own part, I feel not the usual inclination to rush away into the country. The summer has passed very quietly and quickly, this fair, sweet summer, which to me has been unlike any other in all my life. There has been light in it and keen interest, and beneath all this a soft tumult of winsome dreams, faint and elusive, perhaps, as all visions are, but priceless as rubies and dearer than much fine gold.

Jack and I often go for drives in the parks together, or oftener still far into the

leafy country, where the song of birds and the sight of bright things growing and blossoming have given vast delight to the little town-bred boy. He cannot sit to Val long at a time, so he and I usually end the afternoon with a drive, and often I take him back to my pretty house in South Kensington, standing in its own shady garden, where the child can play as he likes, and tumble about the lawns at his leisure.

Sometimes Val looks us up in time for a cup of tea in the afternoon, and sometimes Mr. Lindsay comes to take his boy home to bed, before he himself goes to fulfil his appointment at the "Memorial" Theatre. The summer has sped like this, but quiet and serene as it has been, none other has ever been so sweet.

One night Val and I go to the "Memorial" to see the piece adapted from Quida. Val never bores me at the play with

meaningless comments or flippant interruptions, therefore he is an escort to be preferred before any other.

We watch the piece with interest from the commencement. The young girl fresh from her convent-school, launched into a world of vanity and worse than folly, bravely trying to remain unsullied by her contaminating surroundings, giving herself up at last a willing sacrifice for the preservation of her mother's good name, a name that no Fuller on earth could whiten, let alone the soul-murder of an innocent child. Then comes the awakening, the child is a woman after all, and in the midst of her bondage to a man half-savage, half-devil, there comes one, the sound of whose voice, the touch of whose hand teaches her at last what heaven may be like. But between her and her heaven is an insuperable bar, and then, poor souls, in the infinite

purity and strength of their own brave hearts, they renounce the bliss which is held before their eyes and bid each other farewell. Ah, the sadness of it! And now the scene changes, I see the sweet white-souled woman a victim to the unjus vengeance of her brutal husband, eating her heart out in the dreariness of a Siberian captivity, where he, her lover, who has renounced her in her prosperity, follows her in her cruel misery, and once more these two, whose world is in each other's presence, stand face to face, and then, ah! then he pleads for her trust, her love, in language fiery and overwhelming, as only such tongues as his can use; but though he pleads as for dear life with all the strength of his nature in the twilight of that desolate room, with the snow-flakes fast falling outside the uncurtained window, it is all in vain, all utterly useless. It is almost more than

she can bear, the agony of this great renunciation, for is not he who prays to her as the very breath of her nostrils, the master of her heart and soul? To the end she is firm, fighting against her love for her honour with a white set face, as steadfast and unchangeable as death. Then at last and only at last, when all else fails, all other pleas are useless, he prays for himself for his own sake, thinking to touch her through her pity for himself. "Think of my agony," he cries, his voice ringing through the house, broken with the sobs of a strong man's tearless misery, as he throws himself on his knees before her, his arms raised in desperate supplication. I can stand no more, but I shall remember it always, always, and "Oh, Val," I gasp, as we leave the theatre, the sound of that voice still surging through my head, "I must have gone."

“ Yes, little woman,” he replies, with a gleam of warning in his brotherly eyes, “ and so did she in real life, depend upon it ; but have you forgotten it was all only acting ? ”

Only acting, I think to myself, but surely it must need a capacity for intense suffering to act like that. “ It is always so with Lindsay,” Val muses on ; “ hang me if one *can* remember it is acting only ; he’s been rightly compared with Delannay the best stage-lover there is.”

CHAPTER IV.

“But how to take last leave of all I love.”

Jean Ingelow.

THE sweet August days have stolen on with the same calm serenity as the early summer. London is hot, very hot, but out here in Chelsea it is fresher. Here comes the breath of the river, and the rustling of green trees, and the faint perfume of Val's little flower-borders steals upwards through the open studio windows. My cousin works lazily, and the portraits of Jack and his father are by no means finished. Of late we have often been together, we four. Gradually, and perhaps unnoticed, the skein

of destiny has been winding itself round our feet, but no one has ever looked beyond the fair golden days, or thought of what is to be the end of it all.

As usual in the afternoon Val is doing a bit at the portrait; he has been telling me that the new piece is announced to open at the "Memorial" in a few days from now, adding that Mr. Lindsay has sent him a box for it, and that of course I must share it with him.

Jack is on my knee, indeed when is he away from me except when he is at peace in his little nest at night? It is dark and gloomy out of doors to-day, and within the weight of impending sorrow is on my heart, which vainly I try to put aside. Presently Mr. Lindsay appears on the scene, and the first glance at his face shows me that something unusual is occupying his mind, making him look so grave.

“Val,” says he, turning towards the easel, “how long will it take you to finish that portrait of Jack and me?”

“Oh!” answers my cousin carelessly, “I don’t know; a month, very likely, at the present rate of working,” and he administers a touch to Paul Lindsay’s silvery hair.

“Because, old fellow, do you think you could increase the present rate? Jack and I”—his face is partly turned from me, but I notice a deep flush mounting to his brow as he speaks—“are going to America. I have been offered a good engagement out there.”

“Going to America!” shouts Val in high astonishment. “Why, what on earth is that for?” and his wide-open eyes are turned on me.

I stand quite still, conscious for a moment of nothing but that the blood is

rapidly leaving my face, and that I am gradually turning to stone. Winter has descended in a moment upon the earth. Summer is over, and now I know what made it so glorious, and I know also at this minute that my life will never be the same again. '

Val averts his gaze from mine in an instant as I gather up my courage and try to say something, failing hopelessly, nevertheless.

Paul Lindsay does not reply to Val's question at once. He is very pale now, and a drawn, weary look spreads over his face, and he does not look at me mercifully. At last, hesitatingly,—

"Well, you know, old friend, I must make money for Jack, he has only me to do anything for him ; you know how little I have left."

As he speaks there is a strange longing,

pleading expression in his beautiful grey eyes, which tells Paul plainly enough that, whatever the real reason for his going away may be, the spoken one is not the strongest, and my cousin looks straight into his friend's eyes and understands, answering him with a wonderful softness in his voice as he asks,—

“When do you go? and for how long?”

Did Jonathan in the old days understand the travail of David's soul, and grieve for it as does this modern Jonathan at this moment? Because he understands it and his own helplessness to avert it, loving him with that love which they *say* passeth the love of women!

And “David” answers in a low, hoarse tone, as he tries to free his throat from the pressure of its collar, as though it were choking him,—

“ In a fortnight from to-day, and we go on to Australia afterwards. It will be two or three years, I suppose ”—and his voice is so strained, we know it is only the force of will which prevents it failing altogether as he turns away towards the open window.

He has not once looked at me, and I—I cannot speak to one of them, I can only take Jack up in my arms, and hide my face in his sunny hair, as I say in my aching heart,—

“ Oh, child, forgive if the deepest pain of it all is not the thought of losing you ! ”

Mr. Lindsay presently leaves the window and comes over to us. His voice is natural once more, but the eyes that meet mine are heavy with the trouble which is weighing upon his mind, and he says, very gently,—

“ You will wish us God-speed, Mrs. Fane, Jack and me ? ”

There is a horrible lump in my throat, and my voice sounds coldly in my ears when I answer him, with my misty eyes still bent over the child's head,—

“Indeed, yes, for little Jack and—and you. And you *must* go, Mr. Lindsay?”—this with rather more command of my tones—“you are obliged?”

“Yes, I am obliged,” he says sadly. “It is best.”

“But the new piece! You can't be spared! What will the public say? And all your friends?” I stammer somewhat wildly.

“It will be very easy to fill up my part,” he replies. Easy, no doubt, but not with an exponent like unto him. “And for my friends”—here a little gleam of something that looks like hope creeps into his face—“who will miss us, we have few friends, Jack and I,” and the gleam

fades away again, then he continues, "Val will miss me, but"—with a pitiful little smile—"I know of none other who need care."

Possibly not, I think to myself. He wishes me to understand, I daresay, that I need not care, but, oh, my God! how my heart aches at the thought of this good-bye which must be said so soon, so soon, and then how worthless my days will be! But I only say, trying hard to maintain what little dignity I possess,—

"And mayn't I, that is, won't you admit my right"—that horrible lump in my throat is bigger than ever, almost forcing the hot tears from my eyes; once more the gleam like hope comes into my companion's face—"to miss—little Jack?"

"If the thought of your absolute goodness to him has given him a claim upon your memory," Paul Lindsay replies, his

face very grave and white, as he lays his hand upon his boy's curls. There is a dark screen behind him, throwing up the perfect beauty of his form against its dimness. The light coming in through the window falls upon his head, marking the exquisite chiselling of his features, and the delicately curved outline of his face framed as it is in soft dark hair, liberally touched with silver at the temples, and the heavy waves across his forehead, and so I shall recall him through all the remaining days of my life.

“Little one,” he says presently, “Mrs. Fane must not forget us, must she? We should like her to remember us both sometimes, and think of us kindly when we are away”—this he says in a very quiet voice, with a murmur of supplication running through it. “You will remember her, my boy, and I—” and here his voice almost

sinks to a whisper—"I shall remember her too."

I cannot answer him now, my tears are so perilously near the surface, nor can I raise my eyes to his face, but for all reply I give him my hand silently, which he holds a moment in his strong warm clasp, and goes swiftly out of the room.

Then for a little there is silence. Val works steadily on with perplexity upon his kindly countenance, but he makes a little too much of his apparent unconsciousness of our presence, Jack's and mine. He does not deceive me, dear fellow, but I know he is purposely avoiding encountering my gaze, and I am grateful to him while I ponder the monstrous fact that Jack's father is compelled to seek fortune in a foreign country, while I at home have twice as much money as any single woman can possibly require,

and I begin to entertain some radical notions on the subject of division of property, including even three per cents. and foreign securities; but unlike my political examples, it is my own wealth I want to divide, not my neighbour's.

The progress of this silent contemplation is interrupted by the entrance of Mr. Cassidy, manager of the Memorial Theatre and a friend of my cousin's. Loud, good-natured, and fussy, he rushes up to Val, in that blustering, upsetting way which is some people's idea of cordiality. Evidently he does not notice Jack and me, quietly seated at a little distance.

"What have we here?" he cries in a jovial tone, as he nears the easel where Val stands brush in hand; "what, eh! Lindsay and his youngster? You'll have to look alive, if you mean to get *that* finished in time. He's off in a fortnight,

off to America, you know. Suppose you've heard, eh?"

"I have," replied Val quietly, "and I shall have to bestir myself as you say."

"Hang the fellow," fumes the manager, "why need he be capering off beyond seas? We want him here. It's worth any one's while to secure Lindsay," he grumbles. "He's a safe draw, I can tell you, with half the women crazy about him and the men all dying of envy."

"That's precisely what the American managers think, I imagine," my cousin replies, and I notice a suspicious twitching of the corners of his mouth, but he does not raise his eyes from his work.

"I've offered him any terms," resumes Mr. Cassidy, "any terms he likes to name"—then it *can't* be poverty which is exiling Paul Lindsay—"if he'll only stay at my show, and 'Romeo,' announced for

Saturday too. I suppose, as the Yankees say, he wants to make a pile."

"Possibly," quietly assents Valentine. My cousin's usual flow of conversation appears to have deserted him in the presence of his overwhelming visitor.

"Well, if money's all he wants," that individual continues, "why on earth don't he go in for an heiress? Lots of 'em would jump at him. Why, he's handsome enough to draw a duck off the water." I can but endorse the opinion of this right-minded vulgarian, as I listen for Val's reply.

"Probably he may have had enough of matrimony, you know; besides," and here he raises his tones slightly, "a man earning a precarious living by his wits, however honourably he may do it, as Lindsay is doing at present, can hardly propose to a woman for the sake of her money-bags."

True, oh, my cousin; but have some of us nothing else in our favour but filthy lucre? "Lindsay is a gentleman, and agrees with me I know," he ends with conviction.

"I've no doubt," breaks in Mr. Cassidy, "he thinks *all* that; it's just like his squeamishness. You gentlemen have no idea of feathering your own nests with the least trouble; but I'm a plain man, and I see no reason why the homely falcon shouldn't roost with the golden eagle, if he has the pluck to reach up to her eyrie."

"And," quietly puts in Val, "provided he does not object to being pitched out again when he makes the attempt."

Mr. Cassidy soon takes his departure, and then I go to Val, who still seems inclined to ignore my vicinity.

"Val, tell me, there was something

about Paul Lindsay's wife, what was it?" I ask of him.

"My cousin," answers Val, "she drank herself to death, six months after that child was born."

Though I invited it, the shock of this announcement almost deprives me of breath.

"She did *that*. Paul Lindsay's *wife*?" I gasp; "but, Val, wasn't she happy with him?"

"Apparently not," he answers, looking me full in the face; "and I daresay you'll think that odd, little cousin. It wasn't his fault. He was everything a good husband could possibly be; but he found out she used to drink before he married her, and nothing could cure her for long at a time. He did all he could, poor fellow. Poor Paul, I shall never forget what he suffered in those horrible days.

He was nearly crazed, nearly broken-hearted with the shame of it all." It is not on record that David ever called upon Jonathan to assist him in his domestic difficulties, so we don't know if their friendship had to stand the test of interference between a man and his wife; but I do know that sad and dejected as Paul Lindsay may have been in the awful days of which my cousin is speaking, that he must have found great help and support in Val's sympathy with him.

"But Val," I whisper unsteadily, "could he, did he *care* for her?"

"Well—no," says my cousin, "that is, not as he *could* care, I should say. He never had, it seems."

"Then why?" I begin, when Val interrupts me.

"He was taken in, through the whole business—wily father, scheming mama, you

know. Poor 'David,' I certainly thought he would have gone mad, when the disgrace became known. There was worse behind, it was said, and her debts were awful, he's been paying them off ever since."

"Worse behind!" I stammer, sticking to that part of the story which has struck me the most forcibly. "Oh, Valentine, impossible; could any woman—?"

"Yes," he says sharply, "*one could*, at any rate, strange as you may think it; and I say, little woman," he continues in a softer tone, "don't pity him too much, sad as it all is for him. It is unsafe to indulge in too much commiseration, you know, and my dear, you are only a tender little dove if you *are* a golden eagle!"

CHAPTER V.

“I could not speak farewell.”

Jean Ingelow.

It is Saturday, and the much-talked-of revival of Shakspeare's “Romeo and Juliet” takes place to-night at the “Memorial.” Anticipation runs high, and a great success is prognosticated for the play.

For the last few days I have had Jack all to myself at my own house. In a week's time he and his father will sail for America; they have asked me to remain in London to see the last of them, but I have said no. There is a positive pain to me in the sight of these two faces

so soon to be removed from my existence, I cannot prolong the misery of farewell any more. They are going, and I cannot face the slow creeping on of the weary days in their presence, and so I elect to say good-bye while I still have the courage to say it calmly, and I am going from town on Monday, waiting only for the sake of my promise to Val to witness the new play with him to-night. The time is very short now, and my strength is nearly worn out. He is going away, my sweetheart, my peace is going with him; but I cannot stand and watch it dying by inches, and count the time, day by day, and hour by hour, within sight of his face, till the deadly moment of farewell comes, as a condemned criminal waits through the agony of his appointed time for that last fatal unlocking of his cell-door to admit the sheriff and the hangman.

Afterwards, life for me will go on, must go on, though every ray of sunshine be driven out of it. Naught but the bread of tears remains to be eaten, but I put the thought of it away from me, I dare not remember it yet.

We go for the last time together to the studio; Val wants to put a few finishing touches to the portrait; he is proud of this picture and worthily so, for it is perfect as regards design, and the likenesses are excellent.

The child stands on his father's knee, with one little arm thrown round his neck. The other is stretched out as he leans forward to possess himself of a white kitten which Paul Lindsay holds in his right hand, a little beyond Jack's reach, while his left arm is clasped round the boy's body. Jack's eyes are fixed on the animal and his father's on him, consequently the

latter's head is slightly uplifted, and the wonderful grey eyes are raised in keen interest to his child's brilliant little face. It is a speaking likeness of each, and Val has never done anything so well.

"What do you mean to do with the thing now it is finished?" he inquires of Jack's father who has just arrived. "You surely don't intend shipping it off like the rest of your belonging, or won't the original Jack be insufficient for your taste?"

"I think," replies he, "that one of them *will* be enough for me to manage, but what am I to do with it," looking ruefully at us both in turn.

"You'd better leave it in my care, I'll see to it for you," promptly puts in Val. "It may be useful in case we should happen to forget what you are both like; but I think he knows that neither of us is

in any danger of that, immediate or otherwise.

When the sitting is over, and Jack at home again safe in his little crib in my room, Val comes to me, and together we go to the "Memorial." We are both very silent to-night, Val I know not why, but my heart is as lead within me with dread of that impending good-bye so soon to be spoken. The exquisite sadness of Shakespeare's woeful love story appeals to me now in words poignant and familiar. The hand of destiny lying so heavily on those two unhappy beings is pressing on me too, pressing sorely, and sadness fills the air, it is everywhere to-night, born of the infinite grief and love which is passing before our eyes. The house is absolutely still, and across the darkness comes the cry, "I have more care to stay than will to go," in a voice which speaks the words in accents of

living sorrow; real, exciting, breathing sorrow, not the mimic grief of a stage hero. "And yet, he goes! ah me! he goes, Romeo always goes, and Juliet is left alone!" And he, my Romeo, will go. I shall hold his hand and look into his perfect face for the last time,—the last time for years,—may be for ever and ever. I wonder dully if farewells and outer darkness always follow in the footsteps of fair love, must it ever end in banishment and death? "Banishment!" he is crying, "there is no end in that word's death." To-day is as yesterday, and as it was in those remote times, when the sad tale was a living reality, so it is now. Love cometh to life in gladness and thanksgiving, and is laid in its grave amid bitterest weeping. Fate's doom is as inexorable as the prince's, and far more cruel, having no hope mingled with it. In all the years to come

I shall have time to realize that "exile hath more terror in its look, *far* more than death." I know it now as I listen for nearly the last time to that voice which is to me as the music of heaven, but only when it has ceased and passed away from reach of my listening ears, for always shall I comprehend the full horror of this doom. "Oh God," I cry in my heart, as blinding tears rush to my eyes, "let me understand the mercy in this woe;" and across the great dim space between us comes the answer in Paul Lindsay's agonized voice, "'Tis torture and not mercy," and his tones are full of passionate heart-ache. "Heaven is here where Juliet is," ah yes, for Romeo and Juliet, for me and one other, but between us stands a barrier of shining gold "like a great gulf fixed," across which one will not stretch out his hand to the other, and that other may not.

Why pity Romeo and Juliet ? indeed I think in this terrible moment I envied them their last sad rest together “at the quiet end of sorrow,” while I had before me a whole lifetime stretched, in bitter and appalling blankness, to live out as I could, somehow, anyhow, but alone always ; and as the full meaning of this forces its way into my brain all my courage fails, and I shrink behind the shelter of the curtain, the tears streaming down my yearning face. I have fought a good fight for my pride, but it is in the dust now, broken for ever, and useless any more, and the scorching tears have their own way at last.

“ Little woman,” says Val, laying his kind, brotherly hand in mine, while his voice is low and soothing, as though he were speaking to a child—“ poor little woman, I dreaded this ; don’t be angry,

little Audrey; I *know*," he whispers tenderly, patting my hand all the time—"but, dear, how could he do otherwise? it is best so, my dear, it is best," he repeats, as if trying to persuade himself of the truth of his assertion. "Oh, Val, Val," is all that I can say amid my sobs, why try to deceive him, my good friend, whose kind words only seem to add to my woe?

"I understand, little cousin," he says, still holding my hands in his friendly clasp. I know he does; has he not trodden the same thorny path himself in other days? "It will be all over some day, child," he continues, "but not yet, God knows, not yet," and there is the pain of awakened memories in his tremulous voice.

"How shall I bear it? Oh, Val," I gasp in my misery, "I cannot, I cannot!"

"God help you, poor soul," he murmurs

as we turn to leave the theatre, and there are tears in his own blue eyes, and "Damn that money," he mutters under his breath as we part at my own door, "and damn Mrs. Grundy."

CHAPTER VI.

“A joy past joy.”

Shakspeare.

SUNDAY has come, my last day with little Jack. To-morrow I leave town. To-morrow I go forth alone upon an unfamiliar, untrodden pathway, whose ways will be weary always, and sad often, whose flowers are scentless, and its music mute. Some day perhaps, as Val says, the pain of it all will end, but it seems to me now as if never again shall I be able to gather up the threads of my life where now their spinning has ceased.

It is evening, and all around the church bells are calling the faithful to prayer, but

I am with Jack, and for the last time,—with Jack, who is crowing and chattering in his own sweet little way, with all the unconscious cruelty of childhood. He does not know why my hungry eyes are drinking in the beauty of his own dear little face, trying to stamp it upon my memory for the time to come, when it will be gone from me. He is sitting among the cushions of a big couch, while I kneel on the ground beside him.

“Mammie,” says the child,—he always calls me Mammie,—“oo’ cry, me tell Daddie,” looking at me with wide open, astonished eyes, and then he throws his little arms round my neck with an impetus which brings all my hair down my back, while the hair-pins adorn the carpet. Daddie is Jack’s panacea for all woes, and Jack and I agree about many things. He is right, too, about the crying. As this

afternoon flies through its appointed hours my tears have been gradually creeping nearer and nearer to my treacherous eyes, and now that the bells tell me how near Jack's bedtime is, bitter regret is my portion for the time so quickly sped.

How rapidly time rushes along when it is precious. After to-day I care not how it flies, but to-night every moment is of price to me, with to-morrow ever in my mind, —to-morrow, which they say never comes.

I have known this little child three months, all through the sweet June weather and July's warm glory, and now August has entered its last golden days. I go over the time from the first day I found him in my cousin's studio to the present mournful hour, and to the coming one, in which he will go away out of my life, it may be for ever, but not out of my heart, little Jack, never that, neither you

nor that other, while I live, and my desolation finds vent in one exceeding bitter cry, "Oh, little child, will *you* ever go away and break some one's heart like Daddie?" as I fling down my head in the cushions at his feet.

Afterwards I learn that somebody, standing on the threshold of the door, on the point of entering the room, overhears this incontinent speech, and quietly turning away, gets himself out of the house to his club, where he writes two notes, one to a transatlantic manager then in London, and one to Mr. John Cassidy, of the Memorial Theatre, Coventry Street; and this done as quickly retraces his steps to where Jack and I are still playing! save the mark! together.

My hair is still hanging about my face in wild confusion, which Jack is amusing himself by trying to increase.

Suddenly a soft hand is laid upon my head, and a voice, "the voice my soul hears," says just above me, "My boy, you hurt Mammie's hair," gently removing the little hands from amongst it. Mammie's hair! It is the only time he has ever called me by that name, and I am conscious of something strange in his tone, and his gaze too, as I lift my startled eyes to his.

"Such bonny hair," continues Mr. Lindsay, while I can only feel the blood rushing over my face, from consciousness of the figure I present, and also in answer to the something new in my visitor's manner.

"I didn't know you were here," I hasten to say, in a tumult of strange bewilderment. "It is Jack's fault," I stammer;—"I won't be a moment," and I hurriedly get myself out of the room to repair damages.

Bridget is just coming from my

chamber to fetch Jack to bed—he sleeps in a cot beside me.

“Oh, madam,” she exclaims, when she returns with the boy, “how his father do idolize this child, you’d think he was a king, why he even kisses his hands ;” but whether Jack or Paul was the king she does not explain. To me they are both kings.

When my hair is once more restored to order, and I regain the drawing-room, Val has arrived. He is glad in his heart that my probation is nearly over, and he brings his kindly presence to help me through the last grim moments. Now he places me my favourite chair, and sits down near me.

“I was just saying to Paul,” he begins, “that I should like to have painted Jack in another position if there had been time.”

“And,” quietly answered Paul, “you

will have plenty of time, if you care to do it. Jack is not going to America at all now." He does not remove his eyes from the carpet, and amid the surprise of this sudden announcement, I find myself idiotically wondering if my hair-pins are still all over it.

"What!" shouts Val, able to express his astonishment in words, "not going at all? How's that?"

"Partly because of his health. Dr. Cameron thinks that"—begins Mr. Lindsay, when I gaspingly interrupt him with—

"But how can you part with him, you'll miss him so awfully?"

"So I should," and suddenly the grey eyes are raised to look beyond me through the open window, "but I am not going either," and the eyes leave the window and rest for a moment upon my face.

“Is that also on account of Jack’s health?” inquires my cousin drily.

“Well,”—and Mr. Lindsay looks down on the carpet once more, while a deep flush mounts to his forehead,—“it is partly Jack’s doing,” he replies, as he rises to his feet and comes over to the window. I am quite still, and I feel every drop of blood has left my face, and I know that for a moment Val’s eyes are upon me, but I make no attempt to speak, my joy is too deep, and I am thanking God from my soul that it hath pleased Him in His unutterable mercy to remove this cup from me.

By-and-by Val departs, and turning to my other visitor, with downcast eyes, lest the gladness in them should speak too plainly, I bid him, ere he goes, to come and say “good night” to Jack,—Jack in his warm little crib, all unconscious of the

mighty change from pain to bliss which has happened within a few feet of his resting-place. As we bend over the cot, Jack, with the quickness of a child to remark the changes and variations in a beloved face, exclaims, "Oo not cry now, Mammie," in childhood's unmodulated accents.

"No, Jack, not now, dear," I whisper, burying my face in his pillow with my arms round his warm little form. "I am not going to lose you, Jack, after all. Good night, little Jack;" and as the remembrance of what was to have been rises up in my mind, "Oh, my darling," I murmur, "how nearly it was being good-bye!"

Then I leave him with his father, whom I hear saying "good night," and bidding God bless his little son before he follows me into the other room once more.

The evenings are drawing in, and it is

growing dim in here. I move restlessly about from one thing to another and back again in a tumult of happy disquietude which won't let me be still. Jack's father leans as usual against the mantel-board, and I feel his eyes upon me as I wander about with a glow of deep thanksgiving in my heart.

"Come and say 'good night' to me," he says presently, with a sort of repressed exultation in his voice. Obediently I walk across the room to where he stands by the fireplace, and offering my hand, I say as usual, "Good night," but my voice trembles, and I have not looked up.

"Do you know, Mrs. Fane," he begins, "you have not told me whether you are sorry I am not going away for years, or glad?" still holding my hand.

"Not sorry, surely," I answer, trying hard to speak lightly.

“No?” he says,—and I detect a slight note of amusement in his tone,—looking at me intently, as my face swiftly grows crimson beneath his gaze. “So you were crying this afternoon,”—his voice grows softer,—“was that on Jack’s account?—tell me.”

“Yes, entirely,” I say mendaciously, and trying to draw away my hand and escape further questioning, I once more wish him “good night.” But my hands are still imprisoned in a firm vice, while Paul Lindsay whispers softly,—

“That is not the way you said ‘good night’ to Jack. You put your arms round his neck, and you kissed him, Audrey,” and he gathers up both my hands as though he would raise them to his own shoulders,—“in this way, you know,” he goes on, “but I won’t do it for you; you must do it yourself, if you will, if you *can*”

—there is no merriment in his tone now—
“and you said—do you remember what
you said?”

“Yes,” I answer simply, “I remember.” Words are very hard to find just now.

“Well?”—and he pauses. “Can’t you do it, Audrey? I am waiting.”

Ah, my God, what is there that I can refuse him? and it is not so difficult after all. With one’s feet upon the threshold of joy, would it not be strange to refuse aught to him who is holding open the golden gate? There is no fear in love, and as he bids me, I lift up my arms, and gently lay them about his neck. His great grey eyes look down at me in the gathering darkness like two stars seen through mist, and the tremulous sweetness of his mouth is divine as he repeats,—

“And you said—?”

My voice trembles with the rapture of untold gladness as I answer him,—

“My darling, how nearly it was being good-bye,” and with his strong arms firmly drawing me close against his breast, he replies,—

“Darling, darling, it would have broken my heart as well.”

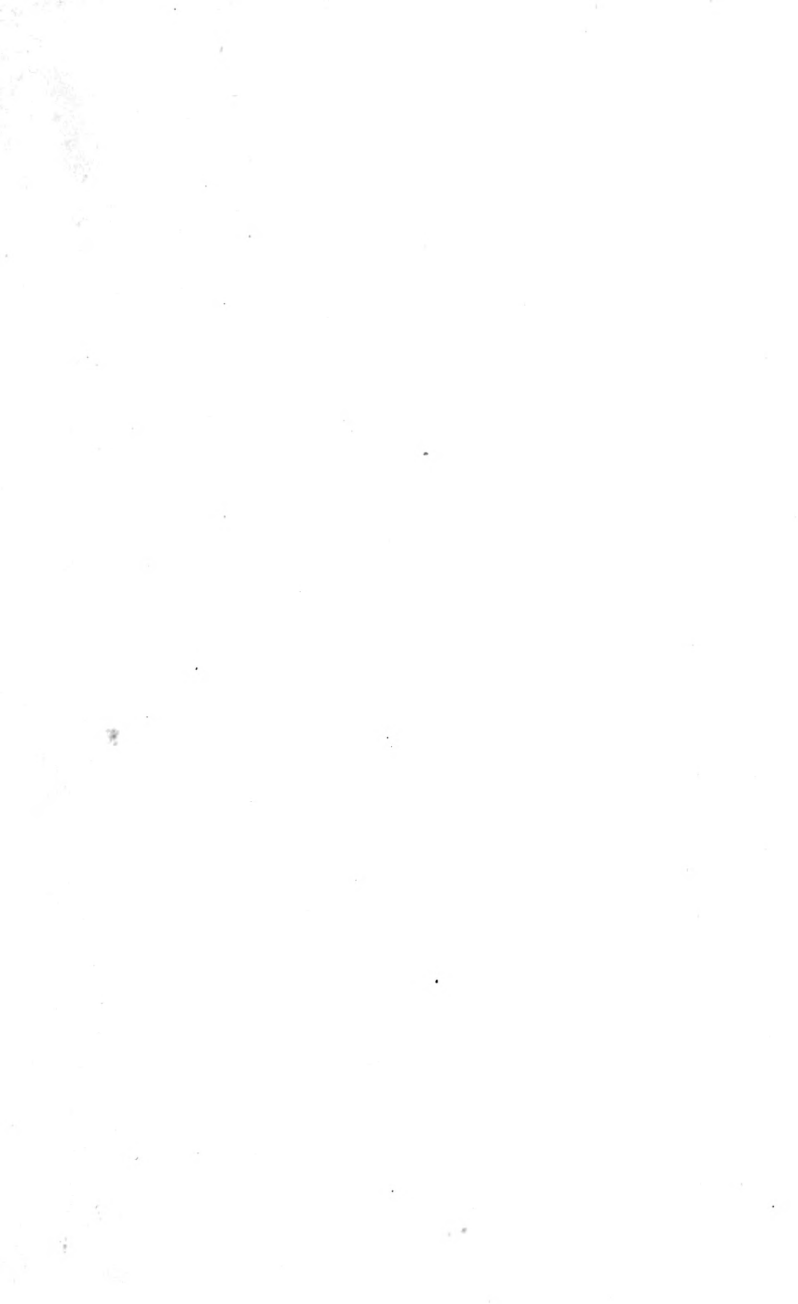
And so Heaven opens to us, after much doubt and sadness and weeping, and we wander forth, hand in hand, into the Paradise of fools.

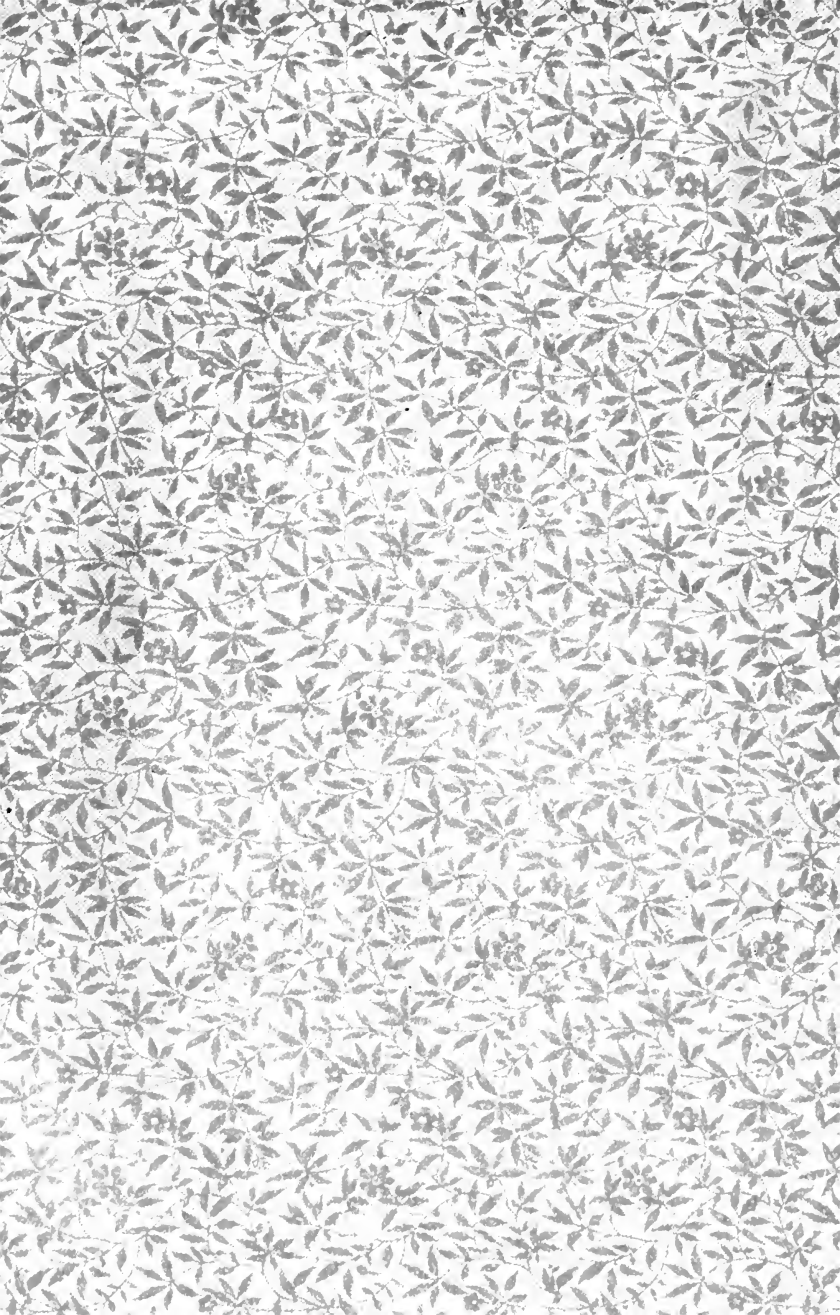
Of fools ?

THE END.

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